



Only got a minute?

Old English (Anglo-Saxon) is the language of a thousand years ago, with a rich literature; it is also the language of many historical records. By learning Old English, you equip yourself to:

- ▶ explore the literature, like *Beowulf* or *The Battle of Maldon*
- ▶ do the history, like the life of King Alfred or Edward the Confessor, or
- ▶ do etymology, like the names of fields, hedges, streets, towns and the people who named them.

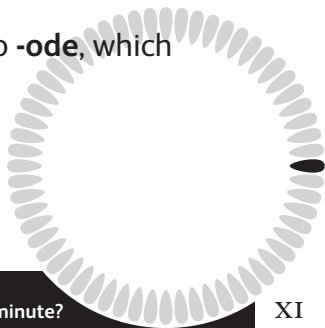
You learn how people a thousand years ago thought, felt, organized society and lived their lives.

They called it **englisc** (pronounced ‘enn-glish’), and you can see from the spelling and pronunciation how English has changed since then. Its fascinating story starts with Old English – the language spoken in the period from post-Roman times to the 11th century.

The main difference between their English and ours is structural. Old English is an **inflected** language: words change their shape or ending according to meaning. Modern English uses an ending *-ed* to distinguish *we love* from the past meaning *we loved*. Old English has many more endings and inflections.

English spelling has changed radically over the centuries: there was, for instance, no letter *v*, so *f* had two values. But you need learn only two new letters before you start this book: **þ**, an old runic letter called ‘thorn’, and **ð** called ‘eth’ (an adapted letter **d**); both letters are pronounced like our ‘th’.

Now you are in a position to read two short sentences in Old English: **se cyning lufað** *the king loves* and **se cyning lufode** *the king loved*. To say *he loves* you use the old *-th* ending, written with the letter ‘eth’. For the past you change the ending to **-ode**, which corresponds to our *-ed* in *loved*.





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Only got five minutes?

What is Old English?

Old English is the language written and spoken from the fifth or sixth century onwards in the part of southern Britain that eventually became the united kingdom of England under such kings as Athelstan and Edgar, descendants of Alfred the Great (king of Wessex, 871–899). Old English stopped being used for writing in the 12th century, giving way to Latin and French, but regional varieties of everyday spoken **englisc** (it was called ‘enn-glish’) continued to be widely used, and these changed and developed into the varieties of spoken English of the present day. We can distinguish broadly two kinds of Old English: literary and everyday.

Archaic, poetic Old English

You can see this sentence from king Alfred’s time on display in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford:

AELFRED MEC HEHT GEWYRCAN

literally: ‘Alfred me ordered to make’

i.e. King Alfred ordered me to be made

This inscription is on the edge of the Alfred Jewel, a ceremonial object that held a pointer for guiding a reader’s eye along the line of writing in a book (see front cover of this book for an illustration). Its language is formal and archaic: the word **mec** by then also existed as **me** *me*, and the word **heht** also had a newer form **het**; it meant *ordered*, and is related to our word *behest*. The name **Aelfred** meant the *rede* or *advice* of the *supernatural being*. Shakespeare spelt his name in different ways, and so did **Ælfræd**: spelling,

though much more phonetic than modern English, was not fixed. The verb **ge-wyrca** *to make, work* (e.g. metalwork) with past participle **ge-wroht** (cf. the term *wrought* iron) – from a root-word **wyrc**, related to **weorc** *work* – illustrates a further characteristic of Old English: much more so than present-day English, the shape of the word would change according to its meaning or use in the sentence. The **ge-** prefix (pronounced ‘yuh’) added a meaning of completedness to the action, while the ending **-an** on the root **wyrc** shows that this is the infinitive *to make*.

Everyday Old English

This is found in chronicles, lawsuits, legal agreements and land transactions, in religious writings such as sermons and stories of saints, and other documents. For example, in a manuscript of rules for a monastery, we find an account of the sign language used by the monks – for instance, when they had to keep silence at certain meals in the rectory. In the extract below, we slightly modernize the spelling, but – with the possible exception of **bralinga**, which means *flat* (from **bradlinga**, which contains the root **brad** *broad*), and **swilche** *as if* (related to modern English *such*) – all the words are recognizably connected with present-day ones. For instance **cyse**, also spelt **cese**, was pronounced with a ‘ch’ and in the later medieval period came to be written **chese** or **cheese**.

Lightly modernized text: Thonne thu chese habban wylle, sete thonne thine twa handa togædere bradlinga swilche thu wringan wylle.

Word-for-word translation: Then thou cheese have will, set then thy two hands together flat as if you will wring.

Idiomatic translation: When you want to have cheese, then put your two hands flat together as if you were pressing it out (i.e. in the process of separating the cheese from the whey).

Original Old English: Þonne þu cyse habban wylle, sete þonne þine twa handa togædere bralinga swilce þu wringan wylle.



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Characteristics

Compared to the present-day language, the word order is varied and free. Old English is more compact in its vocabulary, and the shape of words was altered by endings, so that many common words such as *love*, *like*, *fall* usually have two syllables rather than one: *lufu*, *lician*, *feallan*. It is harder to be monosyllabic in Old English.

Sounds

The letters **þ** and **ð** both represent the modern English ‘th’ sound; **g** before **e** was pronounced ‘yuh’; and **c** before **e** was ‘tch’; **sc** was ‘sh’ – examples are: **þing** *thing*, **gear** *year*, **ceas** *chose*, **scir** *shire*. Between vowels, **f** sounds as ‘v’: **lufu** i.e. ‘lu-vu’ means *love*. If you get the sounds of the language right, it recreates the authentic words of the texts, making them more memorable and easier to learn.

Vocabulary

Much of our present-day core vocabulary is Old English: *hands* and *feet*; *hearts* and *minds*; *love* and *goodness*; *fall*, *fell*, *fallen*; *one*, *two*, *three*; *Monday*, *Tuesday*, *Wednesday*; the personal pronouns *he*, *his*, *him*, *her*, *it*, *thou*, *ye*, *you*; and basic words like *is*, *are*, *was*; *have*, *had*; *to*, *for*, *with*.

Compounds

Old English personal names are often two-word compounds: **Ead-weard** *blessed guardian*, **Ead-gar** *blessed spear*. Place names also have two elements: **Oxena-ford** *crossing-place of the oxen* is Oxford, **Æppeltun** *apple farm* is Appleton. More complex or abstract ideas

are formed in a similar way: **scir-gerefa** *shire-reeve* i.e. *sheriff*, **scir-ge-mot** *shire-moot* i.e. *shire assembly*, **prinnes** *three-ness* i.e. *trinity*, **word-hord** *wordhoard* i.e. *vocabulary*.

Actions in time

The present tense is recognised by **-þ** or **-ð**, the ending **-th** that we still see in Shakespeare's *the rain it raineth* every day. The past is marked in two ways: by **-od-**, that is to say, the **-d** ending that we see in *it rained* yesterday; or by the change of vowel, as in *she chese* a husband, he *fell* from his horse.

Three words for the

We find the basic forms **se**, **seo**, **þæt** like the three broad groups of masculine, feminine and neuter in German or the two words *le/la* in French. The noun **brocc** *badger* was masculine; so if you wanted to say *the badger* you said **se brocc**, but for *the adder* you said **seo næddre**, and *the horse* was **þæt hors**. These gender markers make words more distinctive within a phrase or sentence.

Cases

Old English had endings to mark the role or function of words in the sentence. This survives in our pronouns to some extent – so we cannot say, for example, of a reputedly amorous king *Edgar loves she*; instead the feminine word has to change its form to *her*, as *Edgar loves her*. In Old English the definite article – the determining word *the* – also changes its form. The basic expression *the queen* is **seo cwen**, but if we write *Edgar loves the queen*, this becomes **Eadgar lufað þa cwene**. And **se cyning** *the king* changes in its accusative case in the same way to **þone cyning**. Note what a liberating effect this has on the word order: **se cyning þa cwene lufað** and **þa cwene se cyning lufað** both mean *Edgar loves the queen*. Similarly: **seo cwen lufode þone cyning** and **seo cwen þone cyning lufode** and **þone cyning seo cwen lufode** could all mean *the queen loved the king*.